

Minutes of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

**29 January 2025 at 6pm
at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Fenton (Chair);
Councillors Davies, Hinchliff, Rahman and Trumpeter.

In attendance: Councillors Jeffcoat and J Singh.
James McLaughlin (Assistant Chief Executive), Alex Thompson (Director of Finance and Transformation), Alan Lunt (Executive Director – Place), Mike Jones (Assistant Director – Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer), Kate Ashley (Strategic Lead Service Improvement) Nicki Gobran (Head of HR Advice and Operations), Claire Spencer (Acting Assistant Director Finance), Kayleigh Walker (Senior Lead Service Improvement), Vivek Krishnakumar (Operations Manager for Transactional Services) and Stephnie Hancock (Deputy Democratic Services Manager).

4/25 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dhatt, EM Giles and Lewis.

5/25 **Declarations of Interest**

No declarations of interest were made.

6/25 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 6 November 2024 are approved as a correct record.

Quarter 2 Budget Monitoring 2024/25

The Board received the quarter 2 Budget Monitoring Report, which set out the Council's financial monitoring position as at 30th September 2024.

The overall projected outturn position for the General Fund was an underspend of £2.128m. This was an underspend of 0.6% when compared with the Council's net budget of £333.008m. To balance the budget for 2024/25 the Council had previously agreed that £7m one-off vacancy management efficiencies would be included within directorate budgets. £7.516m was forecast to be delivered against this target across the Council. The Board noted where efficiencies remained to be identified within directorates.

In response to comments and questions from members the following was highlighted:-

- The Vacancy Management Panel was likely to continue. Agency staff were used where appropriate to ease pressure on services and there was no indication that any services were under specific pressures.
- Homelessness Prevention Grant Funding had not been utilised in previous years so was available to offset any current pressures created by the significant increase in requests for temporary accommodation in the current year, however demand was difficult to predict.
- Lower contractor fees had created significant savings on Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) transport; however demand was still increasing. There was no indication that the reduction in price had resulted in a reduced service quality.
- Details of bad debt figures would be included in the quarter 3 monitoring report. A pro-active approach was being taken to debt management.
- Lower mortality rates had contributed to an overspend in Registration Services.

The Board welcomed the report and was assured that the Council remained in a good financial position.

Vacancy Management and Sickness Absence

The Board received a report detailing vacancy management and sickness absence data from 2019 to present (to compare pre and post pandemic data).

In response to escalating costs associated with rising demand for SEND Transport identified in quarter 3 of the 2023/24 financial year, vacancy controls had been implemented to achieve a targeted saving of £7m in 2024/25. 230 (184 full-time) posts had been identified across the Council to be frozen, with all requests to fill vacancies requiring approval of a newly established Vacancy Management Panel. To date 88% of requests had been approved, with only 4% declined, and a further 9% being withdrawn after submission.

Comparison of pre and post pandemic data indicated there had been an increase in permanent vacancies from 420 (2019/20) to 554 (2023/24) and the use of fixed term contracts had increased post pandemic. There was minimal variation in relation to the use of agency staff. Noting that there had been changes in the organisation's structure since 2019, the Board was informed of explanations to account for vacancies across the Council. In summary there was little difference between pre-pandemic and post-pandemic vacancy levels.

Sickness absence data was reported for 2019/20 through to 2023/24. It was noted that there had been a dip in sickness absence during the height of the pandemic in 2020/21, due to lockdown measures. In common with patterns seen in other organisations, the number of employees taking time off sick had risen post pandemic but had since reduced to just below pre pandemic levels. The percentage of employees taking time off sick in 2023-24 was 59% compared to 60% in 2019-20.

The average working days lost per employee had increased from 9.23 days (2019/20) to 11.35 days (2023/24). This number had begun to fall pre-pandemic. Stress, depression and mental health remained the leading cause of sickness pre and post pandemic and had increased. In the year 2023-24 this had accounted for 29% of all sickness. Back and neck and other muscular skeletal problems combined had largely remained as the second largest cause of sickness.

Again, due to changes in the organisation's structure since 2019 like for like comparison was not possible, however sickness had increased across all directorates. The Board noted that the Place directorate had seen the biggest increase, due to the demands of these front-line services and new legislation.

The Occupational Health and Wellbeing Service offered a range of interventions and support services. There was also a network of 62 wellbeing champion, led by a wellbeing specialist, promoting the services and supporting various initiatives and events throughout the year.

Looking ahead, a strategic resourcing team had been set up to support directorates to fill hard to fill vacancies. Sickness absence management guidance had been reviewed, and the new guidance was being trailed in services with high absence rates. Absence and Wellbeing Directorate review meetings were taking place from November 2024 and persistent absentees were continually being reviewed and support provided to managers. Beyond these immediate measures a full review of the policy suite and targeted approaches with management would be taking place in 2025.

In response to members questions and comments the following was highlighted:-

- It was for individual managers to determine whether an employee could work from home when unwell (if requested) or call in sick.
- Analysis of data did not identify a causal link with the introduction of the vacancy management process and increasing sickness absence.
- Lessons learned exercises were taking place across the Council in relation to change management practices and trades unions were also being engaged in this work.
- The Chief Executive expected staff to work from the office a minimum of two days a week to support collaboration amongst teams and this was not likely to decrease, but was dependant on service need, with some teams requiring more office attendance.

Performance Management Framework – 2024/25 Quarter 2 Monitoring

The Board received a report detailing progress against the Corporate Performance Indicators for quarter 2 of 2024/25. Performance measures for 2024/25 had been aligned against the outcomes under each strategic theme, which, along with the updates to the business plan actions, would allow the Council to understand if it was delivering against the Council Plan.

A two-tiered approach to performance measures had also been developed:-

- measures that were within the gift of the Council for which meaningful and ambitious targets could be set, of which there were 175.
- measures that were not solely within the Council's control so no targets were set, but were important for the Council to monitor, of which there were 37.

Of the 212 performance indicators, 86 were annual measures and 126 were quarterly.

Using a RAG (red, amber, green) rating to indicate progress, of the 114 performance indicators reported on this quarter 23 were rated red, 18 amber, 46 green, and 27 had no RAG rating. Of the 14 annual performance indicators reported on this quarter, 7 were green, 5 were amber and 1 had no rating.

In total, 87.21% of all actions in Assistant Director Business Plans were on track, with only 7.54% of actions experiencing delays. A further 4.59% of actions had not been started but this was in line with expectations. Of those actions delayed, the majority sat within Healthy Sandwell (5), Thriving Economy in Sandwell (8) and in One Council One Team (5). The lack of progress in relation to Healthy in Sandwell generally related to delayed contract start dates and progress was expected in quarter 3. The delayed actions in Thriving Economy related to external factors and delays within the One Council One Team theme broadly related to delays in the transition to a new telephony system together with other digital improvements to front facing services. The Board noted detailed explanations for the reported variances.

Officers undertook to circulate additional information to members outside of the meeting in relation to the following:-

- An explanation for the increased rate of smoking from 2020.
- Assurance that GPs had sufficient capacity to meet the targets for NHS Health Checks.
- How the increased rate of infant mortality was being addressed.
- Definition and calculation for National Indicator 95 (NI95) in relation to street cleansing.

10/25

Consultation and Engagement Activity

The Board received a report detailing the Council's consultation and engagement activity with residents.

A key element of the Council's Improvement Plan was to deliver improvements to resident consultation and engagement. A cross-directorate officer working group had been established and had mapped out existing engagement activity and researched best practice. The mapping activity had highlighted an inconsistent approach to consultation activity, inconsistent collection of demographic data, duplication and missed opportunities to share findings. Best practice research found that a number of local authorities used Citizenspace, or similar platforms to great effect.

An options appraisal was presented to Strategic Leadership Team in November 2022, and approval had been given to:-

- Annual residents' wellbeing and perception survey.
- Follow up focus groups x 4 to deep dive into issues raised by the residents' survey.
- Annual residents' budget consultation.
- Follow up focus group to deep dive into issues raised by the budget consultation.
- Procurement of the Citizenspace platform.

Citizenspace had gone live in April 2023 and since then 11,139 surveys had been completed across 145 surveys. The surveys that had garnered the most responses were the 2024 budget consultation, the play satisfaction survey for children & young people, a survey on managing litter and an open spaces assessment survey.

A Citizenspace user group had been established to support staff using the platform and share ideas and good practice.

Underpinning all consultation and engagement activity was a set of Standards and Principles developed by the cross-directorate officer working group and in consultation with the Equality, Diversion and Inclusion team.

In response to members questions and comments the following was highlighted:-

- Activity undertaken in response to engagement – “*you said, we did*” – was reported on Citizenspace, but relied mainly upon residents to seek out as contact details were not collected as a matter of course with consultations.
- Before utilising Citizenspace, users needed to be clear on the rationale and capacity of the activity and how results would be used.
- Citizenspace was not a subscriber platform, and the Communications Team supported service areas when targeted engagement was necessary.
- The new neighbourhood working model would further improve communication and engagement with residents.
- The engagement Standards and Principles required consideration of what was the best mechanism and audience as well as encouraging use of existing connections.

11/25 **Tracking and Monitoring of Scrutiny Recommendations**

The Board noted progress on previous recommendations made.

12/25 **Cabinet Forward Plan and Board Work Programme**

The Board noted its work programme position for the remainder of 2024/25.

Resolved that the Chair reviews the work programme with officers.

(Meeting ended 7.57pm)

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